

**Pedro Almodóvar and Icíar Bollaín on Gender Violence in Spanish Cinema**

Research Thesis

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## **Introduction**

This research seeks to examine the effects of Francisco Franco's dictatorship of Spain on how women were portrayed in Spanish cinema released after the Transition period and into the 2000's, and whether the regime had an influence in such portrayal during the recent years following Franco's death. Francisco Franco ran a fascist government built around conservative Catholic ideologies from 1939 until 1975, which included severe restrictions on women's rights. The women who fought for social reforms during the Second Republic were either exiled, repressed, or jailed. Spanish society during the dictatorship worked to implement the traditional family and rigid social structure that left women to household chores, being a good wife, and not much more. A woman was prohibited, through "permiso marital," to get a job, spend the family's income, own any property, or travel without a male companion. Female adultery even received harsher punishment than its male counterpart. (Limonero)

Social order during Nationalist Spain was mainly influenced by the Catholic Church and set out to basically reject the modernizing Spanish Republic formed before the Franco regime. An overarching idea of the dictatorship was to return to the "Golden Age" Spain of Ferdinand and Isabel, which was theorized to be accomplished by traditional Catholic teachings and values. These Catholic teachings were incorporated into everyday life and education, as Spain was transformed into a Catholic state during Francoism. One specific value was considered the most sacred by the Church and the "basic unit of society" by Franco, which was the family. While the family unit was considered the most important part of Franco's authoritarian society model, not

all members were deemed equal. Franco reintroduced the 1889 Civil Code as part of the *Fuero de los Españoles of 1945*, which gave legal status to the male as head of household, meaning he would be officially in charge of all other members within the household and would be essentially their face of representation in the public sphere, because women and children were confined to the private sphere. The head of household status also notes that a man who is head of household, has control over all sexual relations within a marriage. Men could legally physically punish women, meaning not only their wives, for adultery, but would not be legally responsible if they themselves committed adultery against their wives. Franco society was largely a patriarchal rule with separate social spheres for both genders and labeled women's destiny as to become a wife and mother. (Grugel, Rees, 128-134)

Spanish media during this period strongly reflected Franco and society's view of women. Experiments within the arts that occurred during the Second Republic, such as increased radicalization and abandonment of censorship in the theater, literature, and film, were considered too radical for Franco's regime as well as the Catholic Church, and therefore ended and even reversed (Grugel, Rees, 129). Propaganda consisted of "advertisements" geared towards wives, for example the *Guía de la Buena Esposa*, that listed "11 reglas para mantener a tu marido feliz", some of the rules being "Ten lista la cena", "Luce Hermosa", "Arregla tu casa", "Hazlo sentir en el paraíso" (Romero). Not only was the portrayal of women in media altered during the dictatorship, but also was the majority of Spanish media in order to uphold an extent of morality as a "base of the national-catholic values" (Carretero, 3). The purpose of cinema at the time was to "reflect totalitarian ideas" and "social realities" (Gascón, García). Because the traditional

goals of women at the time were to be a good wife and to reproduce, magazines, cinema, and propaganda in favor of the Franco regime, often dominated where women fit in in the media.<sup>1</sup>

Cinema plots of Francoist cinema highly correlated with these traditional goals and “social realities”. For the most part, women featured in Spanish cinema were forced into the role of engagement, marriage, or motherhood (Gascón, García). It would have been rare for a film, for example *Mataharis* (2007), directed by Icíar Bollaín, to exist during this period, because the plot centers around the women’s work and home-life balances. At the same time, the power imbalance between men and women allowed for arguments between couples to capture the struggle between genders (Gascón, García). This power imbalance is carried through past (the Franco regime and the Transition) into Pedro Almodóvar’s cinema as well as Icíar Bollaín’s either inadvertently or in order to create a separation from the conservative cinema. The Spanish woman had responsibility of maintaining the success of the relationship, most likely due to her structural role of being a good wife and tending to her husband’s needs. In the 1950’s, Francoist cinema even creates a narrative around women being desperate for a man, only marrying them for money, and although the men are not that interested in their suitors, they still feel some ownership over them, like *El tigre de Chamberí* (1958), *Muchachas de azul* (1957), and *El andén* (1957). (Gascón, García).

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<sup>1</sup> During Francisco Franco’s regime in Spain, there were numerous outlets of propaganda supporting conservatism as well as the oppression of women. For example, the *Noticiarios y Documentales*, also known as NO-DO, were distributed to spread support of the dictator and gain control of the news, media, and public opinion of the state. The Radio Nacional de España was also censored by the state to sway public opinion and featured programs such as “Consultorio de Elena Francis” which operated as an “Ask Elena” type of segment. The Consultorio de Elena Francis was created by the Falange’s Sección Femenina and offered rather blunt and restricting ideologies about women’s roles and rights. One example of such was saying the “lack” or “failure” of pregnancy was solely the fault of the woman in a relationship, wives could cure homosexuality, and the most important role for a woman is motherhood. ([https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&u=https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consultorio\\_de\\_Elena\\_Francis&prev=search](https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&u=https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consultorio_de_Elena_Francis&prev=search))

Franco period cinema includes two different types of women that are exemplified through both Pedro Almodóvar and Icíar Bollain. One typical woman of Franco cinema was the “active woman”, who fights to convince the man she chooses to reciprocate her interests. Between the two directors, we see Icíar Bollain use this trope, where her female characters are proactive and independent, like Milady in *Flores del otro mundo* (1999) and all three women of *Mataharis* (2007). On the other hand, Franco cinema also includes the “passive woman”, who is the chosen one by the male character, and basically has little room to be able to accept or deny his advances. The passive woman is often seen in Almodóvar’s films, where the men control the narrative depending on the social, mental, or physical state of the female characters, such as Marina of *¡Atame!* (1989) and Kika of *Kika* (1993). On the opposite side (Gascón, García).

Pedro Almodóvar was one of the first breakout filmmakers, and perhaps the most famous one, after the Transition period. As a young gay man from La Mancha, Almodóvar purposed his films as a “recant” of the Franco period, granting him the label of a “feminist director”, even though his films created humor out of kidnapping, rape, voyeurism, and gender violence. His first film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y Otras Chicas del Montón*, premiered in 1980, but there is much to say about feminism in Spain in the 80’s vs feminism in the 2000’s and 2010’s. As time went on and Spain began to break further away from traditional Franco ideology, his label as a feminist director began to change. With increasing awareness of domestic violence came an almost “denunciation” of Almodóvar, and after the turn of the century he began a new approach at filmmaking and feminism. However, this “denunciation” did not occur out of the blue. “The Almodóvar of 2002 was not the Almodóvar of 1993 and yet there continued to exist what we might call an approval gap in the reception of his films in Spain, “...novelist and literary critic Laura Freixas argued against what she identified as falsely liberated attitude,” (Cerdán, Labayen,

144-146). In 1997, the murder of Ana Orantes by her ex-husband after suffering years of domestic abuse began the reform and societal acknowledgement of gender violence and can be recognized as a catalyst for the change in attitude toward Almodóvar's films.

After the national news story broke of a woman named Ana Orantes out of Granada being murdered by her husband in 1997, after her testimony against his abused was broadcast across television stations across Spain, the country's view of gender violence began to evolve. The era following the death of Ana Orantes, the inclusion of gender violence into Spain's criminal code, lead to an increased understanding of domestic violence and the emersion of directors, especially women directors like Icíar Bollaín, who sought to portray gender violence in film but in a way to inform, to explain, and to dissect the patterns of abuse women have so long suffered. In her film *Te doy mis ojos* (2003), the main character Pilar suffers abuse highly similar to Ana Orantes. While the death of Ana Orantes was almost a call to action for lawmakers and society to understand the seriousness of gender violence, *Te doy mis ojos* acted as a follow up on this same call to action.

### **How the Death of Ana Orantes Changed Spanish Cinema featuring Gender Violence**

In 1997 in southern Spain, Ana Orantes was murdered by her husband, José Parejo Avivar, of over forty years. The abuse began immediately after they got married and manifested in various ways. She was not permitted to have much contact with her family and if she did, it resulted in physical abuse, and he forbid her from furthering her education. Her mother in law knew about the abuse and while speaking of the situation, she said "Kiss her or hit her, it is none of our business". She would be physically beaten for cooking food too hot or too cold which would worsen if he was in drunken rage. Their eight children were subject to witnessing the abuse of their mother as well as physical and sexual abuse by their father. At seven years old,

one of their sons, Francisco Javier, tried to commit suicide due to not being able to endure the physical abuse his father inflicted on him nor the abuse he would witness of his mother.

In order to keep the abuse hidden from the public, Parejo would constantly relocate the family to rural areas with small populations, and when populations would begin to rise, he would immediately relocate the family elsewhere in order to keep the family secluded. Because the abuse commenced during the majority of Francisco Franco's reign, Ana was unable to get a divorce. The power imbalance between men and women created by traditional conservative morals would have made it extremely difficult for her to go to the police to be able to remove her husband from the home. Orantes had attempted to sue Parejo fifteen times during Francoism but each attempted ended up fruitless. The Guardia Civil reportedly commented about the situation, "Those are normal rights within a family," (El País).

It would not be until 1996 when Orantes was able to get and finalize a divorce against Parejo; however, the ruling still forced the two to live together. Their villa would be separated by floor; Orantes would have the top floor while Parejo would take the ground floor, but there was still a common space for them to share. Because of Orantes' forty-year ordeal with Parejo, she attended a TV broadcast on Canal Sur to tell her story as a survivor of domestic abuse and encourage other sufferers that they can come forward. Multiple witnesses as well as the Guardia Civil commented that Parejo promised he would get revenge on Orantes, for reasons unspoken but plausibly for overcoming his abuse and outing him to all of Andalucía that he is a predator and abuser. Thirteen days after the broadcast, he doused her back with gasoline, lit her on fire, fled the villa and left her to burn alive. Following the widely publicized event, Spain incorporated domestic violence into their criminal code in 1999, established the ability to get restraining orders, and labeled psychological violence as a criminal offense (Hidalgo). In 2004,



the Spanish government signed the Comprehensive Law Against Gender Violence, and in 2007 the Law for Effective Equality Between Men and Women (Ramírez).

This singular news story essentially changed the way domestic violence was portrayed in Spanish cinema forever, as well as the way the public and government treated domestic violence. Icíar Bollaín worked to show domestic violence in its most raw form, but instead of having the male character as a main feature, her films would follow the thought process and actions of the woman suffering the abuse. There are clear parallels between the Orantes' story and depictions of gender violence within Spanish cinema from the 90's to 2000's. Bollaín focuses on showing little violence and more trauma, while Almodóvar's films up until the late 90's has done the opposite.

*Te doy mis ojos*, directed by Bollaín, connects the main character Pilar's accounts of abuse by her husband to similar instances that Orantes, and most likely other victims of gender violence have encountered. For example, Bollaín seeks to prove that the power imbalance and "machista" ideologies from Francosim have transcended past the Transition. A neighbor of Orantes and Parejo recalls Parejo saying the things that angered him most about Orantes post-divorce were that "she was financially supporting the family (through employment), while [he] was unemployed,". Pilar's husband and abuser, Antonio, forbids her from finding a job and making a salary, most likely to ensure that Pilar and her son are completely dependent on him. In order to find sanity through her situation, Pilar finds part-time work at an art museum in Toledo, similar to Orantes acquiring employment when she is forced to still live with her ex-husband, like Orantes working at a grocery store. Bollaín also uses Pilar's mother to represent Orante's mother in law. Pilar's mother believes Pilar is better off with an abusive Antonio than to be

single, while Orontes's mother in law was not willing to put a stop to the abuse, she knew Ana endured. (The New York Times)

While the death of Ana Orantes in 1997 had not turned Almodóvar's films into public service announcements, it did increase his sensitivity and awareness around the portrayal of femme fatale suffering women and machismo male counterparts. Two of his films I will discuss from him, one premiering in 2003 and the other in 2006, *Hable con ella* and *Volver* have drastic changes to his depictions of relationships and gender violence within those relationships. It is difficult to pinpoint what the exact cause, but his approval rating between 1993 and 2002 began to fall. This can either be attributed to his films being less controversial, considering his objective and claim to fame was that his productions were so outlandish and breaking boundaries from the Franco era, or the new realization of gender violence throughout Spain that could have led to a somewhat "protest", or new feelings surrounding Almodóvar's older movies.

### **Almodóvar's Films as a Post-Transition Depiction of Feminism**

Pedro Almodóvar came to the spotlight during the Movida Madrileña, a movement based out of Madrid that focused on liberating the Spanish identity after Francisco Franco's death in 1975 and primarily gave way through media forms, such as art and cinema. To counter cinema of the Franco period, which was heavily censored even to omit kissing scenes, Almodóvar almost seems like he is making up for lost time (Gascón, García). While he intended to create cinema as a "reaction to the Franco period," by including overt vulgarity and femininity not featured in films during the dictatorship, he actually reinforces many of the ideologies surrounding toxic

masculinity, traditional gender roles, and even the reasoning of gender violence through his plot lines and character developments (Saenz).<sup>2</sup>

*¡Átame!*, premiering in 1990, took many traditional and machista tropes from the Franco period, as well as anti-feminist cinema in general, and created one of Almodóvar's earliest successful films. Almodóvar's intention of *¡Átame!* was to "parody oppressive gender norms", with the use of a film within a film, believing that he can overcome traditional gender roles in the film by showing Marina, in her film within a film, surviving her kidnapper while also falling in love with Ricky, her actual kidnapper. What *¡Átame!* actually does is exploit gender violence and cinema tropes of toxic masculinity. He uses Marina as the vulnerable femme fatale due to her drug addiction and previous sex work and is also cast as the femme fatale in her film within a film. The first trope Almodóvar explores is voyeurism, showing Ricky peeping into Marina's dressing room, as well as Marina's movie director, Espejo, focusing the camera on her in sexual ways while filming the movie.

Almodóvar consistently makes a plot out of the "chase" of a woman. In this situation, the woman is perceived as playing "hard to get", so a man has to be overly persistent, often times ensuing force, for her to realize that she is interested in him. This is the bulk of the storyline within *¡Átame!*, where Ricky keeps Marina prisoner, but genuinely believing this will bring them closer. The idea that a woman wouldn't not be interested in a man, and that a man can indeed force a woman to have romantic or sexual feelings for him stems from the power imbalance

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<sup>2</sup> Although not included in the main analysis, Almodóvar's premiere film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom, y otras chicas del montón* (1980), was the precedent for the way he portrayed gender roles and violence against women in his movies to come until the late 90's and 2000's. When Pepi confesses to Luci she is raped, Luci responds "Bueno, por lo menos disfrutaría un rato," and when Pepi admits to Luci that Luci's husband was the rapist, she responds "Ay que cabrón, debería afortunado...I think something is missing here, like "debería sentirse afortunado?" and does not show any remorse for Pepi (nor does Pepi express any real sentiment about being raped besides not being able to profit from her virginity).

between women and men. In Ricky's mind, although severely distorted, there is no possibility that Marina may just not be interested.

Another one of his earliest films, *Kika* (1993), has come to light due to the extreme misogyny surrounding rape. It has come to light that the ex porn star and now rapist, Paul Bazzo, has escaped from prison, and Kika's maid Juana admits that Bazzo is her brother. Juana tells Kika and Ramón that she would allow Bazzo to have sex with her in order to keep her from raping other women. In this instance, Almodóvar insinuates that it is not a possibility that Paul Bazzo should not take advantage of other women, nor have sex with his sister, but that the women around him need to adapt and learn how to control the situation as best they can. Soon enough, Paul Bazzo breaks into Kika, Juana, and Ramón's apartment, and Juana tries to give herself up to Bazzo so that he does not rape Kika. As Almodóvar films Kika's rape for a significant amount of time, the rape becomes casual; the two even go as far as just speaking conversationally while Bazzo is raping her. Meanwhile, a peeper in an apartment across the street, who ends up being Ramón's father, calls the police. The police believe he is hallucinating, and only decide to investigate the rape because they are bored at the police station. Andrea is alerted about the rape and rushes to Kika's house, not worried about Kika's well-being, but for the possibility of viewers this could bring for *Peor del día* if she catches the rape in action, even asking if she orgasmed. Ramón returns home to find a startled Kika, who had just been raped, but also to many of their possessions being stolen. While Kika tries to confide in him about her rape, Ramón pays no attention and expresses worry about his cameras being stolen.

The lack of attention and seriousness surrounding Kika's rape makes *Kika* one of Almodóvar's lowest rated films of all time. Originally, the film was to be titled "A Poorly Timed Rape" and the reason why it was edited was because Almodóvar thought, "There are

oversensitive people in the world who don't need to see a film to mount a campaign against it,". He doesn't take into consideration the insensitivity of making humor out of rape yet takes offense to the fact that people want the title changed who haven't seen the film, since the movie is supposed to be humorous. However, because Almodóvar's goal in producing cinema was to garner attention, and concerning *Kika*, he feels like the movie was a personal success, since it "create[d] a lot of polemic," (Cerán, Labayen, 137). *Kika*'s compliance during the rape is theorized as being a parallel to the societal and judicial compliance surrounding violence against women (Gálvez, Hernández). Yet still, it does not appear much different to Franco period cinema if Almodóvar's main goal is about ratings. In fact, half of Almodóvar's male antagonists in his films are rapists (Gálvez, Hernández). Clearly he is opposing conservative Spanish cinema through the actions of sex in his films, however because it is not consensual, it seems to fall back under the category of following machista ideals.

After the death of Ana Orantes and increased awareness of gender violence, Almodóvar begins to release cinema that reflects the public's outcry against toxic masculinity, "The Almodóvar of 2002 was not the Almodóvar of 1993," (Cerdán, Fernández). *Hable con ella*, which premiered in 2002, features a main male character distinct from previous ones, like Ricky, Nicholas, Ramón, and Paul Bazzo. He is not physically attractive, nor suave or controlling. The only way he is able to secure the woman he is interested in is when she goes into a coma. Also, Benigno is the first character of the four films to be arrested for the rape of a female character. The entire hospital shuns Benigno when they find out he forcibly impregnated Alicia and he goes to jail for the remainder of the film.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), distinctly separates itself from his other 80's-90's films and can be categorized more closely with his movies from the 2000's. *Todo sobre mi madre* features a predominantly women ensemble, with one of the men in the film transitioning to become a woman and the other with severe dementia,

### Chicas Almodóvar

One of the most notable, if not the most notable feature of Almodóvar's films are the way he directs and configures his female characters. The females of his films are extremely sexualized physically, he claims in rebuttal of Franco's repression of women (Lev). Popular overlapping features of Almodóvar's girls are their slim and sexual body types accompanied with minimal clothing. While women in cinema during the Franco period were categorized as "a seductive danger to be punished for transgressions against social order," Almodóvar seeks to create the "New Spanish Woman" (Goss, 33). The idea of the "New Spanish Woman" meant, an "educated, liberal, middle class, single or separated, sexually active, and assertive woman" (Goss). His work to liberate women in cinema works physically, but by inflicting each one with a certain type of issue that separates them from the rest of society, and the only people who are successful in their rehabilitation are the men in the film still exemplifies lingering effects of women in Franco cinema. This is because the women in Almodóvar's earlier films, such as Marina in *Atame!* (1990) and Kika from *Kika* (1993), are unable to move up in society or help themselves without the help of a man, but the men in his films can excel in society independently, regardless of any ailment. Men are clearly at a societal advantage and do not face the same judgement, if any at all, nor repercussions, of their controversial actions.<sup>4</sup>

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leaving the women to take control of the plot. He also touches on controversial subjects without using them as the butt of his jokes- for example Esteban's transition to Lola, Rosa and Huma's homosexuality, and Agrado working as a prostitute.

<sup>4</sup> *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988) is another one of Almodóvar's films that features women whose agency is closely tied to that of the men in the film. The chaos throughout the film ensues because of Iván leaving both Lucía and Pepa, and it is later discovered Pepa's neighbor Ana, has also been left by her boyfriend. However, the ending of the film provides different for Pepa because she stands up to Iván, proclaims her independence, and is not willing to take him back nor accept his mistakes, even while being pregnant with his child.

One concrete example of this femme fatale type character, where the woman is liberated in her own ways, whether it be sexually, politically, socially, etc., is Marina in *¡Atame!*. Marina is an actress, but also a former addict and porn star; this is what isolates her from regular society. The male “ringleader” enters the scene in order to “reshape the injured woman” (Lev). In this case, Ricky, the male ringleader, is institutionalized, clearly giving the notion that he also is isolated from the majority of society. Yet, his issues are largely overlooked, because it is Marina who needs saving. Leora Lev argues that previously, what “exemplified machista was rape,” meaning that because the sex between Marina and Ricky, her kidnapper and “savior”, was consensual, this makes Ricky a less machista male character and even begins to loosen the definition of machista overall.

Almodóvar’s earlier films even go as far as to make humor out of suffering women. Most of the main male characters in Almodóvar’s films experience some sort of internal or external turmoil, but it is displayed as insignificant to the plot or to the ability of the man to still appear emotionally and/or physically stronger than a woman. While Almodóvar’s women are constantly categorized for their misfortunes, the men’s issues go unnoticed by society. For example, Marina in *¡Atame!* worked in the adult film industry and was into drugs and Kika of *Kika* is a makeup artist for dead bodies who is sleeping with her boyfriend’s father. Even with his movies starting in the 2000’s, such as *Volver* (2006), the main character undergoes abuse by a male figure in their lives, such as Raimunda, her sister, her mother, and daughter Paula.

### **Societal Connections**

Something that Almodóvar does bring to light are the internal or external forces or situations that can influence somebody to either abuse a woman or be the victim of abuse. It can

be argued these factors contribute to the lack of attention surrounding gender violence in his films because some of these factors seem almost incurable, for example reality television, unorthodox mother-son relationships, mental illness, distorted realities, and lack of father figures.

In *Kika*, Almodóvar sheds light on toxicity of reality TV, or the increasing interest in taboo or grotesque media. Leora Lev makes a connection with the obsession with true crime reality shows to Andrea, the host of *Peor del día* (cite). Although watching true crime reality shows do not make an abuser, it does touch on the fact that murder, crime, and abuse, sell, as well as the public's fascination with the three. Through a larger lens, the author of *Te doy mis ojos* (2003) and *Hable con ella* (2002): *Gender in context in two recent Spanish films*, explains the relationship between formalist cinema and Almodóvar's films. Formalist cinema places "image over reality", in this case, the director and producer are not trying to create anything that mirrors or represents a real-life situation; if something is outlandish but the movie sells, and people are talking about it, it's a success (Cerdán, Fernández).

That being said, Almodóvar's films do capture the fact that many reality television can skew people's perspectives on murder and crime because they convey it in a fascinating matter. However, it should not deter from the fact that Nicholas is a cold-blooded murderer. In the beginning of the film, Nicholas even mentions to the interview that "Authors are infamous for murdering their wives," somewhat jokingly. Following the allegory of Andrea and *Peor del día*, who represent stopping at nothing for television viewers and ratings, it can be assumed that Nicholas could be a murderer to inflate his book sales. While it is symbolism to the lengths people will go for money and fame, Almodóvar adopts this same ideology through his films.



In *Hable con ella*, Almodóvar also demonstrates the effect of mental illness and upbringing as a direct relation to Benigno's ability to interact with women. Benigno spent the majority of his life caring for his sick mother, but it is insinuated the relationship is slightly abnormal, somewhat alluding to an incestuous infatuation. This unorthodox mother-son dynamic is commonly discussed or incorporated in works featuring domestic violence at the hands of a man.<sup>5</sup> While the mother figure is not outwardly displayed in *Hable con ella*, the lasting effects of being socially isolated from the entire world besides his own mother are clear catalysts to Benigno's social understandings. He grows up attending to and caring for a woman who is so sick she can barely communicate with him, but he knows she loves him since it is his mother. This plays out in his "relationship" with Alicia because even though she is unconscious, Benigno cares so deeply for her the way he cared for his mother, that he believes she too loves him back and the relationship is consensual. The difference between Benigno and previous main male characters Almodóvar features in his films are that Benigno is the complete opposite of the original machista figure that Almodóvar made central to his plots.

Almodóvar attempts to use Benigno to counteract his previous machista and abusive male characters. While Benigno lacks the typical, physical appearance of a machista male, his undisclosed mental illness and hints of homosexuality are used to cover up him being machista, even though he still rapes an unconscious woman and wants to marry her, while she is still unconscious. Because of his ailments, viewers are more likely to have sympathy for Benigno than they would for the abusers of Almodóvar's previous films because they do not appear handicapped of social abilities and are physically attractive enough to create a relationship with a conscious woman. This decision by Almodóvar almost does more harm than good in his desire to

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<sup>5</sup>In the novel *Algún amor que no mate* (2002), by Dulce Chacón, the abuser has been coddled by his mother his entire life to the extent where he truly believes he can do no wrong.

appear more sensible in the 2000's. By associating a "machista" men with being rapists, Almodóvar is able to use fewer masculine characters that still inflict abuse or rape upon their victims but appear gentler or a looser version of masculinity (Lev, 2009). This way, the rape doesn't seem like a rape because of how vulgar Almodóvar used to depict rape in his films, such as in *Kika*. In comparison to more "machista" figures, Benigno (and Ricky of *¡Atame!*) seems like "a more positive alternative to the Francoist patriarch," yet still commits the same acts as his other machista antagonists (Lev, 2008).

Distorted realities also fall upon another trope or feature of Almodóvar films that contribute to the reason why a male character is abusive to their female-counterpart. Both Ricky of *¡Atame!* and Benigno of *Hable con ella* have the inability to distinguish fantasies from real life, or what is acceptable in real life. Audiences can find sympathy with the two because their primary goals are to develop a genuine relationship and hopefully get married. It is also important to mention that Ricky is physically attractive, and even when he brings Marina in handcuffs to her pharmacist's house and Marina begs for help, the pharmacist cannot take her eyes off Ricky, and asks if it's her boyfriend even though she is her kidnapper.

Another common feature throughout his films is the lack of a father figure. Interestingly enough, this phenomenon is correlated not only with the death of Francisco Franco looming over Spain after a seemingly smooth Transition period, but also with Almodóvar's upbringing without a prominent father figure (Allbritton, 227). In *Hable con ella*, the lack of a father figure in the Bengino's life has forced him to be the man of the house and be there for his mother much more than a son in a nuclear home. As a result, he developed an obscure relationship with his mother that blurred the lines of what a real-world romantic relationship is supposed to be like. *Volver* of 2006, lacks a father figure as well, although much of the plot surrounds him; because Raimunda

discovers that he used to rape her so technically Paula is her daughter and sister. The father figure in Paula's life, Paco, spies on her changing, looks at her sexually, and finally attempts to rape her in their kitchen. However, because *Volver* was one of Almodóvar's more modern films, it centers around the relationships between the women in the film who dealt with abusive male figures. They appear closer and stronger together as a result of the abuse they have endured. Both Raimunda's mother and Paula murdered their respective abusers.<sup>6</sup>

While Almodóvar does well at pointing out some micro and macro forces that play a role in gender violence, it can sometimes come off as excusable, or even expected, for some of the characters in his films that are flawed from unorthodox upbringings or experiences. On the other hand, Icíar Bollaín focuses on the macro-scale effects that can lead to an abuse of power in any type of relationship, whether it be within partners, friendships, or colleagues. Bollaín references the traditional power-imbalance between men and women from the Franco period in each of her films to uphold the theory that these ideas cannot just die out even after Franco's death, and shows how they amount to the physical, emotional, or cultural abuse inflicted on her female characters, which is her primary focus of each film.

### **Bollaín's Cinema to Increase Social Awareness of Gender Violence**

A stark contrast between Almodóvar and Bollaín's films featuring gender violence is the use or purpose of the depictions of violence. Almodóvar's films are purely entertainment forms, "formalist" cinema, where the main goal is to create a discussion around the movie, to garner attention around it and then increase box office profits.<sup>7</sup> Despite their controversy, Almodóvar's

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<sup>7</sup> The contrast in portrayal of women, gender violence, and conservative Spanish influence can stem from the differing backgrounds of Almodóvar and Bollaín. Almodóvar grew up during Franco's rule and was more affected by the regime because he was a homosexual living in rural Spain. This can most likely attribute to Almodóvar using

films have become symbolic in Spanish in representing and also refuting the Franco machista period. On the other hand, Bollaín's films are geared towards increasing awareness of the gender violence, especially against women, and portraying real life situations. For example, between *Te doy mis ojos* (2003), *Mataharis* (2007), and *Flores de otro mundo* (1999), we rarely see more than one or two clear acts of violence against a woman character. What Bollaín focuses on instead, is the psychological effects that women endure as victims of gender violence. Using *Flores del otro mundo*, *Te doy mis ojos*, and *Mataharis*, I will explain how the portrayals of gender violence and toxic masculinity by Icíar Bollaín cannot be paralleled with Almodóvar's usage of the two because they are used to represent conservative Spain against new Spain through women's perspectives.

*Flores de otro mundo*, which premiered in 1999, features three women on a journey to Santa Eulalia to begin a new life and meet a potential suitor during their arrival. The movie is not focused on gender violence or toxic masculinity as the principal subject, but instead of the trials and tribulations of three women in their journeys. Bollaín even states that she does not seek to make *Flores de otro mundo* a feminist film; she just wants to highlight the women's journeys within Santa Eulalia (Leinen, 91). However, Bollaín successfully explains the "dos mundos de Santa Eulalia", through the perspectives of Marirrosi, Milady, and Patricia, in particular, Milady and Patricia who come from the Caribbean to Spain. They travel to Santa Eulalia assuming that Spain will automatically be a dramatic improvement in standard of living and quality of life due to the impoverished conditions where they came from, but they eventually discover that Santa Eulalia is actually not that different from their respective home countries to explain that Spain is

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humor or satire to make light of the dictatorship. Bollaín, on the other hand, was born towards the end of Franco's rule and would have not experienced much the real struggles women endured because she was a toddler at the time. It is stated in her biography that she grew up in a very liberal household, which can explain why she seeks to inform the public about the oppression of women and violence against women in a realistic manner.

not the liberal and modern society that everybody thinks it is after the Transition period, and that the effects of Franco's dictatorship still linger in a less overt manner.

One couple in the film in particular, Carmelo and Milady, is the subject of the majority of the toxic masculinity and gender violence. While Carmelo practices "el turismo sexual en Cuba con regularidad", he meets Milady in Havana and brings her to Santa Eulalia (Leinen, 91). Immediately, her arrival initiates various cat calls, "Qué dentadura, qué dentadura...! Qué labios!", introducing her as a sexual object to the men of Santa Eulalia (Leinen, 93). While Milady lives a liberated life in Havana, she feels like Carmelo can provide her with the "degraded material" that she cannot acquire there (Leinen, 91). The first thing Carmelo does when he shows Milady his house is show her the kitchen area, insinuating that is where she will spend the most of her time outside his bedroom and the two places in the home where she belongs. It is also important to mention that her name in the film, Milady, is a reference to the possessive "my lady". Milady represents the objectification of women when positioned alongside her companion, Carmelo. He makes it a point to show her only the bedroom and the kitchen when showing her his home, seeing that these would be the only two rooms she will need. At the same time, Milady is a paradox to her own name because she does not succumb to the control Carmelo tries to assert over her, and proves her independence throughout the film.

Although the main focus of the film is not feminism nor domestic violence, there is one scene that Bollain uses to highlight what some of these women suffer in hopes for a better life. Milady takes a weekend trip to Valencia, and when she comes home to Santa Eulalia, Carmelo is doing contracting work when she goes to tell him about her weekend, and he starts to continuously beats her for leaving on her own, because it denounces his ability to control her. This scene highlights the toxic masculinity and traditional gender roles of conservative Spain but

does not allow the beating to become one of the main focal points of the film, nor is it used for humor or pure entertainment. What separates her films from Almodóvar's is that Milady does not submit to the situation, and instead leaves Carmelo and Santa Eulalia for good.

*Te doy mis ojos* separates itself from *Flores del otro mundo* and *Mataharis* in the way that the entire film actually is about gender violence. Opposite of Almodóvar, the gender violence in *Te doy mis ojos* references the Franco period yet also raises awareness about the subject to the Spanish public. Bollaín bases the film on the idea that "in any environment where one is seen as less or undervalued, opens the door and lays conditions for the abuse of that person," an idea stemming from the Franco period (Curry, 133). Antonio, the abusive husband, clearly represents Franco's Spain, as well as its legacy known as "La España vacía," through his toxic masculinity and traditional theories about women, such as forbidding her to make an income, physically abusing her, and psychologically abusing her through threatening himself. During group therapy for anger management, the therapist asks Antonio and another man to act out a scenario between a husband and wife. Initially, nobody volunteers to act as Pilar, and when they finally do, the only things they can think of her to say are "Qué...Qué?" and to mimic her cooking in the kitchen.

Pilar succumbs to the abuse for a majority of the movie, but not because she is a femme fatale character that needs saving by a man. Instead, Bollaín has Pilar return to Antonio time and time again to reference genuine abusive relationships, where the abusive partner is so manipulating that the victim finds reasoning in going back to them. Throughout the movie though, Pilar is able enough to understand the situation she is in. The title *Te doy mis ojos*, originally comes from the scene during Juan's birthday where the couple "give" each other their body parts, and occurs again later in the film when Pilar and Antonio are in bed together, and she

says to him “Te doy mis ojos.” Although on the surface it seems Pilar is saying this because they are sharing an intimate moment together, during this scene the phrase has a deeper meaning because she wants Antonio to be able to see the physical and psychological effects he has inflicted upon through her eyes (Curry, 137).

A common allegory Bollaín incorporates throughout *Te doy mis ojos* is the art featured in the museum where Pilar works. The museum contains numerous traditional Catholic pieces of art. One artwork shown is La Dolorosa, where Pilar notices her sunken eyes and dull face. Another notable piece of art in the museum is Danaë receiving the Golden Rain; Danaë was locked up in an underground chamber by her father. When the painting is shown, Pilar is posed exactly in front of a naked Danaë, referencing how the two were both trapped. At a deeper glance, it could be a reference to the event that occurs at the end of the film, where Antonio strips Pilar naked and locks her outside on their balcony for the neighborhood to see. Pilar also takes note to the Burial of Count Orgaz painting, where Count Orgaz is dead at the bottom of the portrait but at the top shows light and Jesus, almost symbolizing resurrection. For Pilar, she notices that this painting outlines her two outcomes of the situation; either Antonio will eventually kill her, or she can rise above his abuse and find the power to escape for good with Juan. (Pereira) Because the paintings are all Catholic pieces, Bollaín uses them as a parallel to conservative Spanish traditions and oppressed women.

*Mataharis*, Bollaín’s most recent film of the three mentioned, does not feature physical gender violence as Almodóvar’s films do, but it does feature structural and cultural violence that women endure in the workplace as well as in the home. The women feature machista men, such as Carmen, Inés, and Eva’s boss, and Eva’s husband. Here, the women do not submit to conservative ideologies and instead are representations of overcoming traditional Spain. For

example, Eva and her husband argue over taking care of their son, and during the argument Iñaki says “You think you are superwoman,” just because she prefers to still work even though she has a son at home. Instead of Iñaki taking care of their child because he is the father, he feels like he needs Eva to ask him to; “You didn’t give me a chance to try.” Iñaki is clearly depicted as the antagonist in the situation because of his traditional points of view.

Almodóvar’s films are also notable for their consistent depictions of voyeurism, perpetrated by a man spying on a woman as mentioned earlier. However, in *Mataharis*, Bollaín places the spectating in the hands of the women. The majority of the difference lies in the fact that Almodóvar’s feature genuine voyeurism, where the perpetrator gains sexual pleasure from secretly watching somebody else, such as in *Kika*, *Átame!*, *Hable con ella*, and *Volver*, while in *Mataharis*, the women are spying but are not gaining sexual pleasure from the instance. Carmen, Eva, and Inés’ characters, in their role of spies, remove the women from the subjects of sadistic narratives and insert the men in the movie as spectacles needed to be followed (Fuentes, 71). Paul Bazzo, Ricky, Benigno, and Paco all commit voyeurism for the same sexual goals, but Carmen, Inés, and Eva, are on personal missions. Although they are detectives, their personal missions are separate from work. Carmen spies on Sergio’s wife with him, Eva follows her husband to discover that he’s secretly had a son with a previous woman, and Inés is undercover in a factory attempting to unionize.

### **Bollaín’s Women**

In contrast to “Las chicas Almodóvar,” Icíar Bollaín represents the female characters in her films in an opposite manner. At the same time, there is a slight contrast between the women of *Flores de otro mundo*, *Te doy mis ojos*, and *Mataharis*, based on the subject matter of each of the films.



The women of *Flores de otro mundo* take control over their respective situations in order to make a better life, or so they assumed, for themselves and their families. While the women are liberated and independent, these attitudes are reflected through their actions and thought processes, instead of through promiscuous outfits or being sexually liberal. What seems more “Almodóvar style” of *Flores de otro mundo* is the way the women arrive in Santa Eulalia to the festival in hopes to find a man. They are looking to find a support system in Santa Eulalia, rather than a man, and are not bound by physical or emotional attraction to the men they meet during the night. Milady especially, is noted for her independence, also an allusion to the independence of Cuba from Spain (Leinen, 94). In one scene, she begins to take control when Carmelo tries to force her to have sex with him, by moving on top of him and leading him to ejaculate prematurely while fully clothed, an act which hinders his goal to appear as a machista and controlling man (Leinen, 94).

*Te doy mis ojos* features Pilar as the independent main character under difficult circumstances because she is being abused by her husband. In contrast to Almodóvar’s exoticizing of women, Pilar is shown consistently dressed like a regular woman, sometimes even in baggy clothes and little makeup. This way, she can exemplify a battered woman, and we can even go as far to assume that Antonio would not allow her to dress in a similar manner as “chicas Almodóvar”, but also mostly to explain that she is not a part of a special or isolated group in society, she is just a regular woman. This depiction also assists Bollaín in getting the point across that any type of woman can fall victim to domestic abuse. Pilar, even as a victim of abuse, still is able to mentally separate herself from Antonio during the abuse. She knowingly gets a job working at an art museum in Toledo even though Antonio advised her to not seek employment since he should be the provider of the house. The first scene of the film even features Pilar and

Juan leaving Antonio to stay at Pilar's sister's house, only to parallel the last scene where she leaves him for good.

Along with Pilar, her sister Ana portrays a great deal of independence while trying to keep her sister from seeing Antonio. Bollaín introduces a generational gap between their mother, a strategic symbol of Franco Spain ideologies, who believes Pilar is better off with Antonio abusing her than with no man at all, and Ana, who continuously pleads against their mother to not invite Antonio to her wedding, and consistently helps Pilar when she needs a place to stay away from Antonio. She is even the reason why Pilar was able to get the position working at the museum in Toledo, because she also worked there.

*Mataharis* is arguably Bollaín's best film out of the three analyzed that depicts independent and empowering female characters. They are significantly more head-strong than any of Almodóvar's girls, but also more than a majority of the men featured in *Mataharis*. Similar to *Flores de otro mundo*, the women's independence is categorized through their actions, instead of how they appear physically or through sexual actions. Another parallel to *Flores de otro mundo* and *Te doy mis ojos*; the women are aware of the abuse that surrounds them. However, this time, it is not physical abuse but is structural violence within the workplace, as well as at home that the women endure regardless of societal class level.

Many of the men in the film are in a place to be able to make a connection between the traditional ideologies they possess and the three detectives who represent liberated and modern ideologies. Maria Fuentes offers the possibility that Carmen's divorce from her husband at the end of the movie is an allusion to Spain's separation from conservative and traditional Spain. Bollaín features Carmen as the busy workaholic, while her husband is the one who complains about her being gone so much, opposite to the stereotype of the man being the provider and the

woman having to stay at home for him. While on the job, Carmen finds her boss's wife cheating on him. In this situation, the women are taking control. It is Sergio's wife who takes advantage of her own relationship, instead of the man.

#### Chicas Almodóvar vs. Bollaín's Women

A noted difference in the subtitles discussing Almodóvar's films and Bollaín's films is between *Las Chicas Almodóvar*, directly translating to "Almodóvar's Girls" and Bollaín's *Women*. The difference here lies in the way Almodóvar depicts the female actresses in his films; they appear to resemble adolescent girls more than grown women. For example, Almodóvar, in his earlier films of the late 80's into the late 90's, rarely shows his female characters exhibiting much agency in his films. As seen in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988), *¡Atame!* (1989), and *Kika* (1993), the women do not seem to have much purpose in the plot without the existence of their male counterparts. They also exhibit traits of children in the fact that they are not independent, and shown in almost constant need of "saving" by the male characters, and often oblivious to the degree of mistreatment they receive from the male figures in the films.

In contrast, Bollaín's female characters in *Flores del otro mundo* (1999), *Te doy mis ojos* (2003), and *Mataharis* (2007), represent more maturity in their actions and thought processes, therefore are referred to as women. Characters like Milady, Pilar, Carmen, Eva, and Inés make decisions not only to help themselves get ahead in life, but also in favor of their families and children. They consistently display independent behavior even when under difficult circumstances, such as physically, emotionally, or structurally abusive relationships. Bollaín does not use the male characters in her films to give the women any agency; instead, she focuses her plot through the perspective of the female characters and the men are at most, supporting characters in each of her films discussed throughout the paper.

## Conclusion

Pedro Almodóvar and Icíar Bollain both heavily feature gender violence physically, psychologically, culturally, and structurally throughout their films. In attempt to uncover if the conservative Franco period had an influence on the way this abuse was portrayed by either director, it was necessary to assess their respective purposes and execution of the abuse. While the two clearly modeled their male characters using traditional ideals from the Franco period, Almodóvar used his representations of gender violence to gain notoriety as a director and entertain his audiences. Opposite, Bollain's representations of gender violence served to increase society's awareness of domestic abuse and the power imbalance between men and women that still exists even after the Transition period.

Both directors use Francisco Franco's conservative policies in an effort to show a parallel between old and new Spain. Almodóvar's execution at this parallel is where his cinema comes off misogynistic because of the lack of sensitivity surrounding topics like rape, domestic abuse, and toxic masculinity. While his male characters do follow the pattern of Franco period males who see women as sexual objects that they have the opportunity to control, he depicts the women in his cinema of the 80's and 90's similarly to the way they were viewed during the dictatorship, instead feeding into the stereotype of the femme fatale. After the turn of the century, Almodóvar does feature empowered and independent women in all of his films to catch up with society's point of view. These movies, notably *Todo sobre mi madre*, (1999) and *Volver* (2006), explore more liberal themes and character developments, while *Hable con ella* (2003) remains a medium between his pre and post 2000's films.

Bollain on the other hand, works to break this pattern by structuring her films differently. While she does include machista, abusive males in *Flores del otro mundo*, *Te doy mis ojos*, and

*Mataharis*, she allows the female characters to take the lead. The females in Bollaín's cinema exemplify new Spain by breaking the link to old Spain, or the men in her films. Instead of femme fatales, Bollaín's women are independent, often take advantage of men in order to benefit their own personal situations, and do not allow themselves to fall victim to long term abuse, whether it be physically, emotionally, or structurally.

Francoist Spain has clearly influenced the way relationships are represented in Spanish film between Almodóvar and Bollaín and is responsible for creating the power-imbalances between gender that are responsible for the majority of plot developments for both directors. As time has moved away from traditional ideologies, views have also changed surrounding the plots and characters of Pedro Almodóvar. Another important consideration in the portrayal of gender violence and traditional Spain is the difference in experiences or upbringing with Franquismo between Almodóvar and Bollaín. Almodóvar grew up in rural, conservative La Mancha as a gay teenager during Francisco Franco's reign, while Bollaín would only be a baby during the end of his rule. Almodóvar seems to tie this personal experience into his films clearly opposite of Bollaín's way of featuring the matter. In this way, his cinema has worked to separate itself from its older tropes of misogyny, gender violence, and stereotypes, and instead to perpetrate entertainment that does not come at the cost of deprecating female characters.

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